

DIRECTOR'S REPORT – SEPTEMBER 2001

Terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A foiled attack that ended in a Pennsylvania field. We watch and listen, riveted by the horror of moments that can never be undone. We anguish for broken hearts that will forever carry the wounds of September 11. We recognize trauma – in the eyes of survivors, families and friends of victims, witnesses, rescue workers and government officials. We see the shock, the deadening of souls that comes with violence. And we know fear as never before.

These attacks awaken us to a world we have long ignored, a world where millions of citizens endure terror daily. Israelis and Palestinians live with daily fear of bombs in markets, shootings on streets; random, senseless death. Women living in Bosnia were held captive in rape camps and forced to bear children of those rapists. These are acts of terrorism. Acts that dehumanize, demean and violate the essence of our humanity.

Women in Afghanistan continue to live in a state of siege initiated by the Taliban take-over of their government. They are denied life outside the confines of their homes. Women have been removed from their workplaces and ordered home because the all-male Taliban declares it is not “safe” for them to participate in even the rudiments of public life. No longer permitted to earn a living, these Afghani women are forced to watch their children starve. Women doctors cannot practice medicine and women cannot be treated by male physicians, so women have no health care. Women are not permitted on the street unless escorted by a man. It is illegal for girls to attend school.

And what of the women who resist? Executed in a public stadium. This too is terrorism. These women may soon endure another wave of terror: they may be in the line of fire from the enemy of their Taliban enemy – the USA.

As we consider this complex fabric of violence and all the possible actions and reactions to September 11 – and all the possible consequences of those actions – rape crisis centers continue to battle the terror of rape. A volunteer sits with an injured woman in the hospital emergency room. A counselor listens to a child’s story of being raped by his father. We console the girl raped by her boyfriend, the woman raped by her husband, every woman injured by threat, fist, knife, gun. We listen, we talk, sometimes we can only witness the pain in silence.

Similarly, we have observed many moments of silence since September 11. Each moment an agony and a treasure, a salute and an embrace. These moments have occurred on national television, in churches, in workplaces, in our homes with family and friends. We have lit candles, held hands, prayed together, leaned on one another for solace and strength.

And as we continue the vigil, the remembrances, the memorials, we can choose to change the world. We dig through our own agony to recognize and honor all victims of violence, all people who live in fear, all the oppressed and disenfranchised who bear trauma as a way of life. We can study our own – and the world’s – history of oppression, revenge and war – to understand the blindness and the myriad failures and mistakes that drove us to our knees on September 11.

We see the wounded and bereft survivors of the September 11 attacks – and we see the wounded and bereft survivors of rape – and we know that violence must stop. We know the hatred and oppression that fosters violence must be healed. We know that each of us must reach inside – into heart, soul and mind – to tap into compassion, trust, commitment to peace. We must seek new responses even if we cannot imagine what they are; we do not have to know the answers to start creating alternatives to violence. As President Kennedy once said:

“One person can make a difference; each of us must try.” We must cultivate respect for the “other.” We must learn to share power and to negotiate differences without bloodshed. We must stand in every victims’ shoes and see the world through the eyes of every single person whose faith, race, ethnicity, politics differ than our own. Only when we step past fear to make that leap will we move the world toward peace, create a world safe for all of us.